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SUBJECT: MASS ARREST OF JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES IN ASMARA

Classified By: Ambassador Ronald K. McMullen for reason 1.4(d).

¶1. (C) Eritrean police arrested a group of 22 Jehovah's Witnesses in Asmara in late June and detained them in Police Station 4. The group consisted mostly of women as authorities had targeted men in earlier round-ups. According to a close embassy source, police detained four children between the ages of two and eight, and two elderly citizens above the age of 70 during the round-up. The mass arrest differed drastically from the Eritrean government's (GSE) previous tactic of conducting long-term investigations followed by quiet house-to-house arrests, a method used approximately from June to October 2008 (reftel). Several of the women arrested were the wives or children of previously arrested men, leaving entire households imprisoned in some instances. The group also included one woman, Luul Tombossa, who had been arrested in September 2008 and later released with the warning of not to practice her faith again.

¶2. (C) The embassy source pointed out that it was police who arrested the group of 22, while the Eritrean National Security Agency (ENSA) conducted many of the earlier arrest campaigns. While this fact may provide some hope that the 22 may soon be released, the source continued, it does leave the denomination's numbers dwindling. The arrested group was half of one of the larger congregations in Asmara. There are "still many Jehovah's Witnesses left" in seven or eight other congregations spread out in the city, she told Poloff, but added that the numbers are noticeably shrinking with the constant arrests.

THREE WOMEN SENT TO WI'A  
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¶3. (C) In separate raids, authorities also captured three women in their early-20s who had previously evaded national service. The three young women were then sent to Wi'a, the military training camp reserved for youth who either fail high school, have attempted to flee the country, or have avoided national service. The embassy source stated the women will face particularly intense psychological abuse for their religious faith and worried also of possible physical abuse.

¶4. (C) COMMENT: Post estimates that there are currently 65 Jehovah's Witnesses imprisoned in Eritrea. Only three have been released since 1994, according to Post sources. Of the three, one was re-arrested (Luul Tombossa), and one, Kahsai Mekonnen, is on "medical release" and has been threatened with re-arrest should he ever regain his health.

